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CIA view: The Russians aren't 10 feet tall, but they'll do

WASHINGTON — During two years as defense secretary, Donald Rumsfeld liked to open speeches by measuring the Russian bear.

The measurements he chose changed from time to time, but the opening went something like this: "I'm not saying the Russian bear is 10 feet tall. I'm saying he's 5 foot 9 inches and you're not going to like him when he's 6 feet."

Since leaving the Central Intelligence Agency, George Bush, its former chief, has come up with still another way of measuring Russian strength. Cast in Rumsfeld's idiom, Bush's warning might be stated: "The Russian bear is exactly 6 feet tall, just as we knew all along. But we have finally discovered that 6 feet is mighty tall for a bear."

Like many strong-defense advocates, Bush focuses on recent data, showing that the Russians are willing to bear much more of a bite in their national budget for arms than had been thought. Bush's agents learned from highly-placed Russian "leaks" that the Soviet Union spends twice as much of its gross national product on arms as the United States had thought in past years.

The CIA has said it had underestimated by half the percentage of the Soviet gross national product spent on arms. The correct figure is 14 per cent rather than 7 per cent.

The United States devotes slightly less than 6 per cent of its GNP to defense.

The confusing point which Bush made was that, although the CIA revised its GNP estimate, the agency stands firmly behind the numbers of ships, tanks, missiles, airplanes, etc., it credits to the Soviet arsenal.

In short, the Russians are not getting nearly as much bang for a ruble as once

believed. But they are willing to pay through the nose for that firepower.

A popular Pentagon device is a comparison of production rates between 1972 and 1976 by both countries.

CIA sources reported that the Russians built six times as many tanks as American industry. Soviet artillery production had an 8 to 1 edge. Twice as many fighter planes were turned out by the Soviets as by the Americans.

Those lopsided production figures were used by Rumsfeld in last year's successful push to win increased military spending from Congress.

The updated GNP figures surfaced from the CIA during that budget push, and Rumsfeld also used them in budget-selling trips to Capitol Hill.

Now, explained Bush, CIA analysts have had a full year to examine the implications of the higher ratio of Russian military spending to GNP.

Bush asked rhetorically: "If all tensions are relaxed in the world, why would they [Russians] put such a burden on themselves?"

Bush said he finds it "worrisome" to ponder what Soviet "intentions" are—what they plan to do with the military which costs them so dearly while the Soviet populace clamors for more consumer goods.

Debate about "intentions" has become the centerpiece of this year's national

defense dialog as Congress talks budget and a new President charts foreign policy.

An important leak has come from within a group of outside experts the CIA hired to help it examine the GNP data and other intelligence. According to the leak, the outsiders concluded the Soviet Union's goal is to build a military and industrial base which would survive a nuclear war and enable the Soviets to go on to become the dominant power on earth.

While the hired experts sounded that doomsday warning, a team of in-house CIA analysts, using the same classified data, reached a less pessimistic conclusion. Nonetheless, CIA sources said their own review is much more glum than earlier studies.

While the CIA and Pentagon continue their chilling rehash of last year's data, defense establishment critics are selling another view. Retired Adm. Eugene LaRocque, a liberal "think tank" defense critic, charges that the dire GNP warnings are mere point-of-sale hype.

"Weapons cost so much today that the only way to afford them is to scare the pants off the Congress and the people," LaRocque said.

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